

## [Interview with Mrs. Bella Ostic]

MAR 22 [193?]

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Albuquerque, New Mexico

Interviews on Eugene Manlove Rhodes

About 3,400 words.

### INTERVIEW WITH MRS. BELLA OSTIC

"My, yes, I know Gene Rhodes well," Mrs. Ostic answered. "Guess I hardly ever knew anybody any better than I did Gene. Come in. Sit down."

She walked over to a shelf and took down a photograph of a girl. From the back of the frame she removed several pictures, sorted them over, and handed me two of them. One was an old fashioned photograph in bad condition,—a picture of a boy with a heavy determined mouth tightly shut, closely cropped hair, direct eyes, a slightly defiant air about him. The other was a snapshot of a man standing in profile beside a horse. He wore riding breeches, and a Stetson hat. His features were clearly outlined against the horse's dark neck — the nose aquiline, the chin definite. He had the slightly protruding sag about the abdomen, unusual in a cowboy, of a man of forty or thereabout.

"That old photograph is a picture of Gene when he was nineteen," Mrs. Ostic told me. "He got mixed up in some kind of a political scrape, and somebody threw him down a well. His

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scalp was all torn and lacerated and they had to cut his hair off short. It was just growing out in that picture.”

“What was the scrape about?” I asked curiously.

“I don't remember, and I don't know as they ever did find out who was responsible for throwing him down that well. I know Gene was a Republican but that's all that I can tell about it now.” C18 - N. Mex.

“I knew Gene for a good many years,” Mrs. Ostic went on. “His 2 father was agent on the Mescalero Indian Reservation, and my father was the blacksmith there. Gene was about seventeen or eighteen when I first knew him. He was born in Nebraska. His father's name was Hinman and he had been a senator from Nebraska. His mother's name was Julia. They had a ranch in the San Andrea's and I believe came to New Mexico two or three years before I knew them. Anyhow, I know Gene was born in Nebraska and so was his little sister Helen — Nellie we called her. She was only a little girl when I first knew them so they couldn't have been in New Mexico many years before that.

“When Mrs. Rhodes needed something done she used to send for me to come over and help her. That's how I got to know Gene so well. His mother was a politician, always writing and going to Washington and doing things like that. She was a meddlesome kind of woman, always writing to somebody, telling this and telling that. She was just meddlesome, that's all there is to it, and she usually had her family in hot water of some kind. I liked her, though. She was splendid company.

“Mr. Rhodes was a quite, serious man. He was a thoroughly honest man too, Mr. Rhodes was. So was Gene for that matter. I know the “ring” at Las Cruces was always trying to ‘get’ Mr. Rhodes. William Riley — he died not so long ago — was a cattle man and politician, and he was the head of the ring. They didn't like it because Mr. Rhodes wouldn't accept poor beef from them, and tried to cause him a lot of trouble. Colonel Fountain — the one who was murdered, you remember, and they never found his body — was an

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honest man too and was always on Rhodes' side. The "ring" never did succeed in running Mr. Rhodes out though. He stayed there until he was retired on a pension. I believe Gene got along better with his father than his mother. Though his mother was very fond of him, too. She always called him Genie.

"Gene couldn't ever talk just right — a kind of lisp. I don't know as you would call it a lisp either, but he couldn't pronounce 'R'. 'Odes' he would say instead of Rhodes. There were other words he couldn't say too which made it difficult for some people to understand him. Although to me — I understood him perfectly. Gene went to college in San Jose, California. One of his college friends was visiting him one time, and he told me that when the boys asked Gene what his name was he told them Eugene Manlove 'Odes'. They all called him 'Odes' until finally he wrote his name on a piece of paper and handed it to this boy and said, 'Here, tell these fellows what my name is'."

Mrs. Ostic settled back in her rocking chair. "I suppose you want to know more about how he looked than you can see in that photograph. He wasn't a bad looking boy — not good looking either. His forehead was always a little too protruding for his other features. He had blue eyes and light hair and a reddish face. He was a little above medium height, not fleshy, rather slender. I don't remember seeing Gene ever in anything but moccasins. He always wore a brown suit, some coarse brown goods with a big plaid. I never saw him with good clothes. Anything would do. I don't know how many shirts I patched for that boy. I remember, too, I made a harness for him to wear his gun under his shirt. He always seemed to think that people didn't like him, and that somebody was going to shoot him or something.

"Gene was always kind of retiring. He lived at the Mescalero agency for more than eight years, and I don't believe he ever had more than a bowing acquaintance with a few of the girls. He was no good at all as a mixer. He always seemed to feel that people didn't like him. And I guess they didn't very well. He was too far above the people that we had at that time. His mind was too good for our class of people. Except for this wife, I never knew him

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to have any women friends except the two Cassad girls in [Messilla?] Park. I remember once those two girls 4 and a Manlove cousin of his stayed at our house for two weeks and they all went fishing a lot. But except for them I don't think he was friends with any girls. I never heard him speak much of men friends either, except for one fellow, Charles Lummis.

“Gene always had a kind of gloomy outlook on life. He hardly ever laughed, and I don't know as I ever did hear him tell a joke. He always liked sad things, sad poetry and sad songs. One thing he loved, and that was to sing. But it was always some kind of a sad song. I remember he used to come over to my house. Maybe we'd be making bread, my sister and I. But Gene would call to my sister, ‘Come on, you and Bella, I want you to sing la Golindrina for me’. And nothing would do but we'd have to leave our dough and come into the parlor where the organ was and sing songs. When Gene got a notion to hear something, he was going to have it. The words to that song were not the same as the words they sing to La Golindrina now. It was something about a man who would never see the shores of Spain again. ‘Nunca mas, nunca mas to ve’. A very sad song, and Gene loved it.

“He was really the strangest boy. He would go from one thing to another — just that changeable. We used to ride horseback together, and sometimes Gene would be telling me a story and suddenly burst out crying, for no reason that I could see. Just that changeable. He would come over to our house and sit down by himself and maybe I'd come into the room and there he'd be crying. He'd cry and cry and when I'd ask him what was the matter he'd just say ‘I'm so miserable, so unhappy’. But I never knew why. His mother always said it was because she was lonely and sad before he was born. Maybe that was the reason. Anyhow, I never could see any [ real ?] reason for his being that way.

“Of course, Gene was always scribbling. While others were talking in a room he was scribbling something most of the time. When I 5 knew him he used to write poetry more than prose. His poems were always about something sad. I remember one — let's see — those poems are at home in Tucumcari with some letters from him in a receipt box. I wrote

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the boys to send them, but they never did. Well, anyhow, I remember the last line of one of them was 'that death is far more kind than love or life'. All of them were along that line.

"Before he left New Mexico Gene had quite a number of things published in a magazine called 'Out West'. I remember he brought that paper over to me and wanted me to subscribe to it, because he said he was going to write or it. I did, but I never had much faith that Gene would ever publish anything much. Gene was usually considered a fool by everybody, poor fellow. I never thought he was a fool but he did seem to be awfully erratic.

"He would do the craziest things of any fellow I ever knew. I remember once he wrote me a letter at midnight from the top of a mountain peak. It was the peak where he is buried. They call it Rhodes Peak now. I had asked him to find the words to a verse by Mrs. Hesman for me. He was on his way from Las Cruces to the San Andrea's and was camping for the night on the top of that peak when he sat down and wrote me a letter enclosing the poem I had wanted. I remember he said in that letter that there was not a lonelier man in the world than he was on the top of that mountain peak at midnight, but that nowhere else did he feel so near to God. Or Nature, I guess he must have said Nature instead of God. Gene wasn't a Christian. Anyhow I never knew him to go to church.

"Another thing about Gene, he was a great gambler. I guess that was the only thing Gene did that I didn't think was just right. I never did see him drink, but they used to say if he sat down to a gambling table, there was no dragging him away. Even in gambling though, he was always honest. A man told me once that he was a good card player, but the reason he didn't make a success at gambling was because he never would do anything the least bit dishonest."

I asked Mrs. Ostic if she knew why Rhodes left New Mexico for the East.

"He married the school teacher in Tularosa," she answered. "She was from New York state and she wanted to go back East."

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"Didn't he get into trouble of some kind?" I persisted.

Mrs. Ostic looked at me sharply. "You mean something dishonest? Nobody could make me believe that Gene was not a distinctly honest man. He always was. If he didn't cheat at cards he certainly wouldn't cheat in the cattle business, or in any other way. He was always getting into a fuss over gambling things, debts and things like that, but I know he never did anything dishonest.

"I remember three days before he left New Mexico he came to our house for dinner, he and his wife and his mother. Like usual, he had a gloomy look. As I say he always had a gloomy outlook on life, but I'm sure there was nothing special bothering him. If there had been I would have known it.

"That was the only time I ever saw his wife. She was a big woman rather pretty too. But she was a very proud woman. I remember when Gene came in he kissed me the same as he always did, and he said, 'Bella, I'm going to leave New Mexico in three days, and I want some of that good tapioca pudding you make, because I may never get any more of it.' I told him I didn't have any tapioca in the house, and he said, 'Well, we'll excuse you to get some then.' Gene was always fond of tapioca pudding. He hated green peas. I remember one day Mr. Roosa was reading a book by Rhodes, and he looked up and asked me if I knew any kind of food that Eugene Rhodes especially disliked. Right away I said 'green peas'. And it was green peas he had written about in that book. To get 7 back to the last time I saw him though, after dinner we all went for a walk around the sawmill. And all that time and during dinner I don't think his wife ever said a word. I guess she thought he was too free with us poor people and she didn't like it.

"That was in 1903 that he left New Mexico and I never did see him again. Some years after that I saw something about him in the paper, and I wrote to him. As I said he had some stories published in 'Out West' before he left and he had the manuscript of that story, Paso For Aqui, but I never did expect him to get much published or amount to

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anything. When I saw that in the paper I was glad he had made a success, and I wrote him care of his publishers, and told him that there was still somebody in New Mexico who remembered him as 'dear Gene Rhodes'. He answered right back. He told me that his oldest son was named Percy Allen. Percy Allen was the name of a song he was very fond of and we used to sing it together. It was supposed to be sung by a woman who said that if she had been able to marry her true love she would have had a son cradled under the wildwood tree. Her love was named Percy Allen.

"Many years later he wrote me again from New York. He said he wanted to have a horse and a cow and live the way he used to in New Mexico, but he couldn't make it work out very well. He told me too that his nerves were all shot, and the reason was that one of his sons had been killed in the war.

"The next time I heard from him he was back in New Mexico. He wrote me from La Lus that he had come back to get color for some of his stories. After that he left for California."

Mrs. Ostic began rocking again and it seemed that her story was ended. Remembering the introduction to *The Trusty Knaves*, I asked her if Rhodes liked cats.

She smiled and said that he certainly liked her cat. "He was 8 always jumping up from the table to give that cat something to eat. We didn't have a piano in our house, but we had an organ. When Gene would play that organ the cat would come running from wherever he might be and walk up and down in front of the organ dragging his tail on the floor. I always thought that cat believed it was his tail that made the noise. Anyhow, whenever Gene would start pumping the organ, in two minutes the cat would be right there, prancing up and down, and dragging his tail. The cat was called Antonio Joseph. I taught school in Lincoln for awhile, and I took a kitten and a little dog away from some children who were abusing them. I named the cat Antonio Joseph and the dog Catron. They were the two big political figures in the State at the time. Both the cat and the dog seemed too weak and bedraggled to live long, and I said that whichever one died first, the man for whom he

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was named would be defeated. On election day the little dog Catron died, and Catron was defeated. When I took the cat home and showed him to Rhodes he said, 'I like the cat all right, but I don't think much of his politics.' Rhodes was boarding at our house at the time. It was after his mother and father had left the reservation. One morning I was sleeping late, and Gene woke me calling at the foot of the stairs, 'Bella, Bella', he called. 'Hurry and get up. Antonio Joseph is Josie. She's had kittens.' That was one of the few times I ever hear him say anything funny, and even then he didn't smile.

"Gene had a horse, too, that he was very fond of. Docre was his name and Docre was a mean animal. But Rhodes thought the world of him. Docre would throw him. Rhodes wasn't a good rider, and Docre knew it. That horse would dump him about every day, but Gene would stay with it. I've seen him ride a bronco and be thrown as much as three times, and get up and ride him again."

Mrs. Ostic stopped again, and I asked her if she knew what kind of books Rhodes had been especially interested in.

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"His people didn't have many books," she said. "We didn't either. People didn't have so many books in those days. But I do remember that he often told me the stories of Shakespeare's plays."

I remarked that I had heard that Rhodes hated the actual task of writing, that he even said he would never touch a pen or pencil again if he could think of any other way to earn a living.

"He might have thought that," Mrs. Ostic answered. "But he couldn't have kept from writing. He was always writing. When other people in the room would be talking and fooling, Gene would be over in some corner with a pencil, scribbling. I always wondered why he didn't



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write about the Indian people because he was very much interested in them, and was always taking notes.”

I realised suddenly that it was considerably past lunch time and rose to go. As I was pulling on my gloves, Mrs. Ostic said, “One thing about Gene Rhodes, he would stop anything anytime to help a person out. Once we had a diphtheria epidemic on the reservation. There was no hospital, no doctor even, and everybody was afraid to go near the people who died of it. And Gene and my father laid out the little body, made the coffin, and lowered it into the grave. The only people at the funeral were Gene and my father and my sister and I. Eight children in one Indian family died, one after the other, and every morning Gene stopped by to bring them water and see if they needed anything. Toward the end of the epidemic the government sent a doctor, a colored man. He was a good doctor and a fine gentleman, and we used to invite him and his wife to our house. But all the other white folks on the reservation would out them. Except Gene — he used to come over to our house often and play cards with them. I guess that's all I can think of to tell you about Gene right now. I didn't know any of the important 10 things about him, but I used to know him pretty well. Maybe if you come back some other day I'll think of some more things.”

Mrs. Bella Ostic,

104 Wilson Avenue,

Albuquerque,

New Mexico.

Age: 65 years.